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ABSTRACT

An analysis of Korean language textbooks currently used by Korean children and of nationally-administered reading comprehension test items for high school graduates reveals a text-oriented reading comprehension approach in South Korea. Text orientation--seeing individual words, phrases, and sentences as semantically unified into a meaningful whole--reflects the organization of the Korean language. A comparison of the Korean and English-as-a-Second Language sections of Korea's National Preliminary Test for College Entrance revealed three significant differences between the sections: while only single texts were used in English reading comprehension, 73% of the items in Korean required students to compare texts; two-thirds of the English text comprehension focused on single words or small portions of texts compared to only half of the Korean; and the English text, unlike the Korean, asked no questions about text types and textual structure. These differences suggest that reading comprehension in English as a foreign language in Korea is less text-oriented than Korean reading comprehension. (MM)

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Reading comprehension in Korea: a text-oriented linguistic approach*

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ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of reading directions in Korean language textbooks, and of Korean and English comprehension items for high school graduates nationally administered in 1980 and 1981, reading comprehension in Korean is characterized as a text-oriented approach that adopts a text (or a connected discourse) as the unit of meaning and language. Items for analysis were categorized, before being tallied, into comprehension of words in various contexts, application of comprehension results, and textuality. Based on the results, (1) "reading between the texts," (2) integration of production and comprehension, and (3) textuality were discussed. Reading comprehension in English as a foreign language in Korea seems to be far less text-oriented than the Korean reading comprehension.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was organized based on an analysis of reading directions in textbooks currently used by South Korean children and reading comprehension test items recently constructed for high school graduates. The analysis yielded some results that indicate Korean reading comprehension in Korea can be characterized as a text-oriented approach.

A text-oriented approach assumes that the basic unit of meaning is a text in mind composed of simple and complex concepts which are referred to as "textual elements" (Chafe, 1972; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hasan, 1978; de Beaugrande, 1980). Language in use is an expression of a text in mind. The textual elements are represented in the forms of individual words, phrases, and sentences. When these elements are semantically unified

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into a meaningful whole, it is a unit of text in language.

A language has its own systematized ways of organizing textual elements into a text. These systems are referred to as textual structures and textual devices, e.g., order of sentences within a text, uses of conjunctions and pronouns, systems of ellipses and repetitions. A sentence-oriented grammar deals with relations between words within a sentence as an abstract form of language. In contrast, a text-oriented approach deals with the textual structures and devices across the sentential boundaries.

To illustrate, let's suppose a baby walks into the kitchen where her Mom is working and says, "My car!" But her Mom will not be able to comprehend what the word means largely because she is out of the context in which the baby was situated. The single word could be a text to the baby, but to her Mom in this example, it can not be a meaningful text.

Then, the baby's brother comes in and says, "Mom, I gave it back to her." This is better than a single word; it is a sentence that represents certain relations between the baby's car, the baby, and the speaker himself. Still, the single sentence is not good enough for Mom to fully comprehend what it is all about. She is not sharing the same immediate situation the children were in. The sentence is not a meaningful text to Mom.

Let's suppose, then, their father comes into the kitchen and says:

"It's all right, Honey. Ujin was loading his cars on the big truck, and put her new car on it, too. But he handed it back to her."

Now, the children's mother understands what it is all about. The monologue her husband produced exemplifies a meaningful text that can convey some meaning in mind to the listener who is not sharing the immediate situational context.

However, the monologue is not sufficient for us to comprehend what it was all about because we do not share the large situational context where the text was created. The monologue does not provide any cultural and family background of the speakers, their social status, the time and place the thing happened, any information about the children and the toys. Therefore, we are likely to provide our own personal background to the comprehension of the sample monologue, which can not be always identical with the actual background the monologue has.

To help us comprehend appropriately what the text means, the speaker has to include, in some way or other, all or some of the relevant information in the text. Texts of this type are the materials children are to read. Unlike single words or sentences, such a meaningful text, spoken or written, requires full and appropriate employment of textual structures and devices to hold the relevant elements into a semantically unified whole. Text production and text comprehension require of children the abilities to deal with such structures and textual devices in text production and comprehension.

When the development of such knowledge and abilities is emphasized, an approach can be referred to as "text-oriented." Reading comprehension in Korea appears to be such an example.

A TEXT-ORIENTED LANGUAGE

Korean has some features and systems that can not be fully explained by a sentence-oriented approach. For example, in English, the following two questions may be responded to with the same form of sentence, when their sentential stress, pitch, and intonation are disregarded.

Who read the story?	Sue read the story.
What did Sue do?	Sue read the story.

In Korean, however, Sue's in the responses have different linguistic markers.

Who read the story?	Sue-ga story-ril ilgotda. (Sue story read)
What did Sue do?	Sue-nin story-ril ilgotda. (Sue story read)

The first marker, ga (or i at the end of a word that has a consonant ending), is the word-ending that marks a sentential subject as new information. The second marker, nin (or in at the end of a word that has a consonant ending), is another word-ending that marks a textual topic as given information. In the above example, since "Sue" has been introduced in the second question, "Sue" has the ending nin, not ga, in the response and "Sue" is the textual topic and given information. The ending nin is also

used for comparison purposes of given and new information.

Ellipsis rules are text-oriented, too. Once a noun is introduced into a text, the noun is assumed to be textually understood and it is not repeated in the subsequent sentences unless its ellipsis may cause some confusion in textual comprehension. For example, in the monologue given earlier, the sentence "Ujin was loading his cars on the big truck and put her new car on it too" will be followed by "girona dollio jotseo" in Korean, whose literal translation will sound like

"But [he] handed [it] back [to her],"

with he, it, and to her deleted.

The features and systems of Korean above mentioned as examples can not be appropriately explained by a sentence-oriented grammar. These characteristics are the indications that Korean is a text-oriented language. In reading comprehension instruction, the Korean textual features and systems are included in instructional objectives.

READING COMPREHENSION

Reading instruction in Korea begins when a child is six years old, the first grade at the primary school. The child learns how to read in the Korean language course. Six lesson hours per week are alotted for the language course, from the first through the sixth grade. According to a recent report on Korean education (Korean Overseas Information Service, 1982),

"every child of elementary school age is enrolled" for free compulsory education for six years (669). Textbooks, including language course readers, are compiled and published by the Ministry of Education. Children use two books each academic year. Some children go to kindergarten; however, it is not compulsory, and no reading is to be taught at the kindergarten level.

In 1980, 95.7% of the primary school graduates went to middle and high schools for six-year secondary education (Korean Overseas Information Service, 1982, 679). Reading is taught in the language course. Four or five hours per week are alotted for the total language course. At this level also the Korean language readers are compiled and published by the Ministry of Education, and students use two books each year.

English is taught as a foreign language at middle and high schools. Maximum five lesson hours per week are alotted. English textbooks are compiled by private authors and approved by the Ministry of Education so that each school can freely select one of the approved books.

Since 1968, high school graduates have taken an annual national evaluation test, i.e., National Preliminary Test for College Entrance. To organize this paper, the comprehension test items included in the two language examinations in Korean and in English administered in 1980 and 1981 were analyzed.

Initially, the items that do not rely on the comprehension of any given text were excluded from the analysis. Texts of poems and Old Korean were also excluded. Then, the test items

included in the analysis were categorized into five: (1) comprehension items comprising comprehension of words within textual contexts, partial or total meaning of a text or texts, and sentence comprehension; (2) application of comprehension results; (3) questions about textuality comprising questions about text types, textual structures, and textual devices; (4) questions about language forms comprising pronunciations, word forms, and sentence grammar; (5) conversations. Finally, excluding the items that belonged to the fourth and fifth category, the quantities of the items included in the first, second, and third category were tallied.

Within the same framework used for the test item analysis, two advanced readers used by the fifth and sixth graders respectively in the primary school were examined. From among the directions in the Study Pages attached to each lesson unit, items relevant to text comprehension development were identified and categorized into (1) read and tell; (2) application; (3) textuality. The items in each category were grouped into several sub-categories. Two beginning readers used by the first graders were also examined within the same framework.

In Korean

As the results of the test item analysis show in Table 1, 41 items out of 100 total items for language tests were relevant to reading comprehension. The proportion gives us the impression that reading comprehension is the most important area in the

Table 1. Korean reading comprehension test items included in 1980 and 1981 NPT language tests. The numbers in the parentheses are those of English test items.

			'80	'81	Total	%		Items
TEXT Single text reading: 27% (100%) Reading of 4/5 texts: 73% (0%)	Comprehension	words in contexts:	2 (5)	3 (5)	5 (10)	12 (23)	64% (86%)	100% 41 (44)
		text, partial:	5 (14)	3 (5)	8 (19)	20 (43)		
		text, total:	6 (4)	7 (5)	13 (9)	32 (20)		
	Application:		2 (0)	1 (0)	3 (0)		7% (0%)	
	Textuality	text type:	4 (0)	3 (0)	7 (0)	17 (0)	29% (14%)	
		textual structure:	2 (0)	1 (0)	3 (0)	7 (0)		
		textual device:	0 (4)	2 (2)	2 (6)	5 (14)		
SENTENCE			0 (6)	0 (11)				0 (17)
OTHERS			29 (17)	30 (22)				59 (39)
TOTAL LANGUAGE TEST ITEMS:			50 (50)	50 (50)				100 (100)

language course in terms of the weight it has in the national examination, even though the number can not literally indicate its weight in the course.

A closer look into the Table leads us to find three big numbers: i.e., 73% for comparative reading of four or five texts; 64% for comprehension; and 29% for textuality. Based on these numbers, three phases of comprehension instruction will be discussed along with the results of the examination of the readers.

1. Reading between the texts

Almost three quarters of the comprehension test items required of the students to read four or five short texts for comparative reading, or "reading between the texts." In other words, in most cases, a student had to read four or five short texts and relate them to each other to answer several comprehension questions. In contrast, no sentence was used taken out of its textual context for test item construction. Even the questions about words and small portions of texts could not be answered without appropriately integrated comprehension of four or five texts presented together as a group.

Reading between the texts is emphasized in the primary school readers, too. Seventy per cent of the lesson units in the advanced readers have two comparable reading texts in each unit. The comparative reading begins in the last lesson of the first beginning reader used by the first graders.

In the English speaking world, Henry (1978) appears to be an advocate of reading several texts as a group. Criticizing an over-emphasis on analytic reading of single texts, he strongly recommends to instruct students to develop their synthetic mode of thinking through reading several texts as a group. Obviously, Henry suggests that thinking processes are the base of reading comprehension and that the development of text reading comprehension heavily depends on the reader's development of thought in reading.

2. Integration of monologue production and reading

Among the comprehension test items, 64% were asking meanings of words in the textual contexts and textual meanings of the given texts. The point is, however, how to help the students develop the abilities to comprehend texts. The analysis of the readers reveals that there is no direct way of teaching comprehension; however, 58% of the direction items for reading at the advanced level are "Read and Tell" practices. The specified directions attempt to lead the students to comprehend textual meanings. For example, some of the directions ask the students to "speak" the theme or sub-themes, to discuss certain relations between particular sub-themes, or simply ask to retell the story. This method of "Read and Tell" is used in the beginning readers, too.

Legitimacy of the attempt to help the students develop their text comprehension through monologue production can be established when a text theory is applied. As was discussed earlier, the basic unit of meaning is viewed as a text, in text theories. A text in language is composed of words, phrases, and sentences. Selection of these textual elements and their integration into a meaningful text require of children textual knowledge and the abilities to use textual devices. We can assume that the textual knowledge and the abilities to produce texts may facilitate text comprehension. In my longitudinal studies of English as a second language (1980, 1981), two findings emerged. (1) Many of the comprehension problems ESL

beginning readers have can be attributed to their immature textual knowledge and inability to use textual devices. (2) The abilities to produce monologues highly correlate with the abilities to comprehend reading texts.

We can hardly state that spoken language abilities correlate with the abilities to comprehend reading texts, mainly because spoken language is ordinarily used within an immediate situational context while a reading text requires of readers the ability to re-create the context within the given text. However, spoken monologues, as distinct from conversations, are comparable to reading texts in terms of their independency of situational contexts and the textual abilities required for their production and comprehension. Olson (1977) and Rubin (1980) discuss relevant questions in their articles.

3. Textuality

Twenty-nine per cent of the comprehension test items were relevant to textuality. In the primary school advanced readers, 28% of the Study directions are about textuality, e.g., dividing a text into sub-texts, relations of the general theme and sub-themes, and relations of sentences in the sub-text. Textual references, sentential conjunctions, and text topic affixes are also included in the directions. This text-oriented approach begins at the beginning reading.

The functions of textual devices in comprehension seem to be neglected in some reading research studies in English.

For example, a propositional text analysis approach (Kintsch, 1974; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978) is frequently employed for comprehension studies. The propositional analysis deals only with concepts and their relations in the text base, and linguistic devices that connect the textual elements are not treated as important factors in comprehension. However, Garnham, Oakhill, and Johnson-Laird (1982) and Irwin (1980) found that linguistic devices that establish textual cohesion influence prose comprehension.

In English as a foreign language

Let's have another closer look into the analysis results shown in the Table. The numbers in the parentheses are those of test items in English as a foreign language. When compared to the Korean reading, the numbers for English reading indicate three apparent differences.

First, in English, only single texts were used for reading comprehension. No question was asked about something across two or more reading texts. In contrast, we found that 73% of the items in Korean required of the students to read "between the texts." On the contrary, 17% out of the total English test items were using "decontextualized" (Widdowson, 1979) single sentences, while no single sentence was used, in Korean, taken out of its textual context.

Secondly, in English, comprehension of word meanings in the given contexts and meanings of small portions of texts

occupied more than two-thirds of text comprehension. Only about one-third were for the comprehension of entire texts. In contrast, whole text comprehension occupied a half of the text comprehension items in Korean and the other half covered comprehension of words and small portions of texts.

Thirdly, in English, no question was asked about text types and textual structures. No particular items were identified that were based on the differences between the textuality in Korean and in English.

These three obvious differences between the reading comprehension test items in English and in Korean give us an impression that reading comprehension in English as a foreign language in Korea seems to be far less text-oriented than the Korean reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

The characterization of Korean reading comprehension as a text-oriented linguistic approach was based on the test items included in the national examinations and on the textbooks. The comparisons of English as a foreign language and Korean in terms of reading comprehension were also based on the test items included in the national examinations. In other words, we have looked into the instructional objectives manifested in the test items and the textbooks, which can give us only a general picture of directions in reading comprehension instruction. Teaching methods, actual interactions between teachers and students

in the classrooms, measurements, and results of reading instruction were excluded from this paper. Research in reading comprehension in Korea was also excluded. A broader picture of reading instruction in Korea is presented in Kim (1979), and abstracts of some research studies and relevant resources on reading in Korea are included in Malmquist (in press).

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